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Farming in the City!

“T By Skip Bell

hey are family to me.” I was enjoying the shade provided by a large old maple while taking a break from weeding vegetables at one of Chicago’s several urban farms. “Skinny arms,” as this mid-teen had been affectionately nicknamed years ago by her fellow gardeners, was relaxing for a few moments as well. I had been observing her joy as she worked, and wanted to hear her story. So I engaged her in conversation. The acquaintance continued through moments of rest and work together. She spoke from underneath the brim of a well-worn baseball hat controlling her generous braids, with a smile that lit up the space around her.

It was easy to tell from the enthusiasm in her voice that the farm had become something important in her life. She had begun years ago when she heard of the children’s summer gardening program from her public school. She was now part of the regular volunteer teen staff. She earned money occasionally at the vegetable kiosk, and helped other volunteers who were just learning the farm’s organic practices. From a tough neighborhood on the south side of Chicago, nurtured by a single mother,

having learned to navigate her way to the farm on public transportation, she was proud of her involvement.

I had simply asked if the young adults from the church who managed the farm had mentored her in any way. Her response was quick and heartfelt. “They are family to me.” I could tell she meant it.

Chicago’s Story

Chicago is home to an estimated 2.7 million residents in the city itself, with nearly 10 million in the standard metropolitan statistical area. Chicagoans love their city. Life revolves around manufacturing, finance, agricultural commodity markets, distinguished educational institutions, cultural institutions, sports, some of the nation’s finest museums, tourism and the achievements of its citizens.

There are challenges as city residents face the reality of gang violence, impoverished neighborhoods, and sub-standard schools in the poorer neighborhoods. Evidence of gentrification can be seen throughout the city: new parks, community gardens and retail centers surrounding new

privately developed urban housing. Investment in the urban landscape has brought suburban families back to the city center to live in closer proximity to jobs, while creating new housing problems for the displaced poor. Rents have increased so dramatically that staying in the city has become more difficult for the working poor.

Chicago remains a city marked by agriculture and horticulture. It is renowned for its lakeside parks, such as Grant Park, Millennium Park and Lincoln Park. In the summer, the lakefront transforms into an attractive beachfront, offering swimming, recreation, biking and family picnicking that people enjoy, always in sight of park or garden space.

The Chicago Lights Urban Farm

Chicago Lights Urban Farm is one of the six programs of a parent 501(c)(3) nonprofit community outreach organization of the Fourth Presbyterian Church located in the city center. Its mission is to provide hope and opportunity to Chicago's children, youth and young adults facing the challenges of poverty. Funding comes from members of the congregation and corporate organizations interested in the service the farm provides.

Fourth Presbyterian Church was organized February 12, 1871. Its current building, a grand gothic structure, dates to 1912 and is noted as a Chicago landmark. On the corner of Michigan Avenue and Delaware, it is in the midst of Chicago's "Magnificent Mile." The congregation of Fourth Presbyterian is large, mostly Eurocentric, and could rightly be described as representing the prosperous residents of Chicago's "Gold Coast."

The Urban Farm began as a local community garden in the Cabrini-Green neighborhood on the north side of Chicago in 2003. The neighborhood has been identified with high crime rates, while being home for thousands of low-income families. By the time the residents began the garden project, the infrastructure of the Chicago Housing Authority-managed developments had crumbled, schools were poor, and police and fire services were lacking. Families saw the shared garden space as a way to improve conditions in their troubled and impoverished neighborhood. When the city of Chicago launched its gentrification program, Cabrini-Green was on the top of the list of places to introduce privately developed mixed-income housing.

The Fourth Presbyterian congregation had purchased land along Chicago Avenue on the edge of Cabrini-Green in 2002 with the hope of building a community center, but those plans were altered when the city revealed its gentrification plans for Cabrini-Green. Rather than relinquishing the land, the Chicago Lights directors called together residents, architects and city officials to consider their vision for an urban farm. The

idea took root. The farm was built in such a way that it could be relocated when necessary, and operations began in 2008.

An urban farm is surprisingly mobile and relatively inexpensive to build—if land can be secured. The Chicago Lights Urban Farm requires fencing, a small mobile office trailer, two greenhouses, a hot house, a tool shed and a produce stand. Soil from six inches deep to two feet deep covers pavement and old foundations, with only a few areas that are bare soil under the imported soil and mulch. There are rows of compost piles, beds for the propagation of worms and their castings, and an irrigation system laid out above ground that can be easily winterized. There are picnic tables for rallying volunteers, and for breaks during gardening activities. The rest of the space is row after row of produce.

A Farm as Ministry

The farm's focus is empowering children, youth and adults through access to healthy, affordable food and economic opportunity. The farm offers training in agriculture, healthful living, leadership and micro-enterprise. It provides a "leveling ground" for diverse neighbors from the city center and the near north side. Wealthy older adults with sweat on their brows, soil on their hands, and stains on their jeans from the "Gold Coast" only a mile away work alongside teens from impoverished neighborhoods. Some of the harvest is consumed by families who serve at the farm, while the rest is sold at the farm stand on the property, by the teens as they set up temporary tables on street corners, or by bicycle delivery.

The farm generates income for teens learning microenterprise through four initiatives. One is an arrangement called "Salad Shares," in which people in the neighborhood pay a subscription to receive home delivery of high-quality fresh organically grown produce. Teens take off on bicycles or on foot with several neatly packaged sacks of fresh vegetables for delivery. A second is allotment gardening. This arrangement allows people to rent a small patch on which they can grow and tend their own garden within the organic horticultural rules of the farm, while using the farm tools available on-site. A third is the kiosk on the property, manned by teens. When the kiosk is open, the produce is also sold by teens standing on surrounding street corners. A fourth method is linkage with "Good Food Mobile," a city-wide food delivery service.

Description of the Farm Staff

Three full time-employees and one part-time employee manage the farm, with a host of volunteers.

The director is a woman in her 30s, who has worked for Fourth Presbyterian Church since she was a teen. Her exposure to the Cabrini-Green neighborhood led her to fall in love with the people, their families and their sense of resilience. All three full-time employees are young college graduates with a vision for service. The part-time employee is a young man from the Cabrini-Green neighborhood of about 21 years of age, who has emerged from daunting circumstances.

The team leading the outreach functions in a relaxed and collegial fashion. They share a small office trailer. During weekly team meetings, they sit down and discuss the challenges and celebrate the victories they experience on the farm. Information flows to the volunteer teams. The directors work side-by-side with the volunteers, and most communication happens with a "spade in the hand." The team receives feedback from the community through advisory committees and ongoing community dialogue.

Three remarkable characteristics are obvious in the leadership team. These are young adults with a vision of compassion. They identify Christianity as service. Their idea of discipleship is quite a contrast to the liturgical "high church" worship services in their Gothic building on Michigan Avenue. I asked one, well covered with soil and looking very much like a seasoned gardener, what the farm meant to her. She replied, "This is my church."

Another apparent reality is that these people know their stuff. As one of the staff stood over one of the large wooden box structures explaining the horticulture of worms for the garden, I realized how little I knew about a simple living thing like worms, their function and how important their presence, with their castings, are to the things we eat. I had no idea there was so much to raising produce! More significantly, my mind moved to the illustrations and parables Jesus employed from the natural world. I marveled at how much Christianity could be seen in the simple workings of preparing the soil, planting, nurturing and harvesting. I also realized that these young adults had developed an awe for how nature works and a respect for creation.

Something else was evident. They were deeply into healthy living and food justice. They delighted in helping impoverished families have affordable whole organic produce and in teaching them how to use it. These young adults forming the leadership team knew that, for the most part, they had come from privileged families and were anxious to distribute the blessings they had received. They were experiencing stewardship. A short distance from the Chicago Lights Urban Farm, about a 12-minute walk, I passed a downtown automobile dealership specializing in new luxury automobiles one afternoon. As I reflected on people dressed in expensive suits and stylish dresses admiring the

automobiles, I was humbled by the contrast of the servants of Christ toiling in the soil with impoverished families only a few blocks away. They were demonstrating Christian discipleship.

I watched a young teen from Cabrini-Green take off on his bicycle with a young adult volunteer to deliver sacks of produce. The sacks were arranged in delivery carts pulled behind their bicycles. What impressed me was the expression on the teenager's face. I thought of the joy expressed when that young man might soar to dunk a basketball or win a race in the neighborhood. He was just as proud to be delivering fresh healthy food, and likely making a bit of income from it.

More About "Skinny Arms"

Of course, that is not her real name; let me call her Denise. Think about her experience, similar to so many others whose lives have been transformed by working the soil together in that place. Like others I met, she says she has learned to work, developed muscles, learned to organize, learned to communicate, learned how to get along with others, learned about plants, gardening, cooking with vegetables and healthy food. She was developing respect for nature and how complex it is. When I told her I followed a whole plant vegan diet, she laughed, said she had tried it, and began to ask questions.

Quite the change for a kid from a tough south Chicago neighborhood. While talking about what the place had meant to her, I asked about siblings. She described one brother, not involved with the farm, spending most of his time on the streets. She said with noticeable sadness in her voice, "He is not safe." After a pause of a few seconds of silence, she exclaimed with that unique mixture of joy and reverence the redeemed express, "But I am safe here." When she said that, I had to turn my face away for a moment. I was in the presence of the grace of God.

I asked about the micro-enterprise. She proudly related recent checks of several hundred dollars each she had earned from selling the produce. But there was more, and she wanted to tell me about it. She now knew what she wanted to do; she would go to a culinary school and become a chef specializing in healthy food. She bragged about a particular dish which was her specialty, and how she had raised some of the ingredients herself. The dish had won a prize in a city competition. She had a dream, I believe a God-given dream, and I imagine she will reach it.

Conclusion

Churches that serve change lives through Christian relationships. It is not always necessary to open the

Bible to lead someone to Christ. Faith in God becomes evident in the serving, in sharing blessings and understanding, and in respecting others without reference to circumstance or position.

One can give a Bible study on the work of the Creator, or kneel down and till the earth beside someone who does not know the Creator. I found you can affirm creation in the lessons of the creation itself. I discovered that working with others on the urban farm is a very effective way to share knowledge and evidence of the Creator.

One can preach about redemption in Christ, or work beside someone to restore a garden in the middle of urban blight. I found that the restorative process of the urban farm inspired confidence in new life and hope. I discovered that restoring a space opens one's mind to the redemptive work of God.

One can quote scripture to assure another that their life has meaning, or admire what they are able to do as you work beside them and realize their gifts. I found that teens from dangerous neighborhoods are talented and can aspire to better things. I discovered that God has a thousand ways to reach a life and fashion someone in His image.

Denise told me she has developed deep respect for those young adults who give their time to work with her, to get to know her. As I watched the staff and other volunteers work together, and observed their laughter and respect alongside teens like Denise, I knew mentoring was going on. I knew lessons were being transferred. Mentors and friends. Relationship. Love. Evangelism.

Like the 12 disciples, like the simple people who left their fishing nets some 2,000 years ago, this can change the world.



Skip Bell, DMin, is professor of church leadership for the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. Skip has served the church as a pastor, departmental director, administrator, and university professor. He has authored "A Time to Serve: Church Leadership for the 21st Century," published in 2003, "Servants and Friends: A Biblical Theology of Leadership" (main contributor and general editor), numerous academic and professional articles, and several curriculums for professional pastoral development. He is a member of the Academy of Religious Leadership.

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